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Singapore paying closer attention to the rising voice of Islam

SINGAPORE is understandably attentive when it comes to issues connected to Islam, be it across the Causeway or in the region.

This is probably because it is anxious to maintain the equilibrium in a predominantly Chinese society with a sizeable Muslim minority, given its brushes with discord between the races in the distant past.

The Straits Times last week mirrored the republic's pre-occupation with Islam and its practice in the region with several articles shoring up the belief that its brand of the religion was the most practical for 21st-century Singapore.

Last Sunday saw the newspaper quoting generously from a speech by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the International Forum on Islam in Kuala Lumpur last month.

Writer Richard Lim, commenting on what is being seen as the Muslim renaissance among some quarters, referred to Dr Mahathir's "call to Muslims to change their mindset and values..."

Tying this with Singapore Berita Harian editor Guntor Sadali's last Wednesday call that moderate Muslims should make their stand known, he said non-Muslims should also make an effort to understand Muslims.

Instead of saying "let the Muslims sort out their own problems. The issues are just too sensitive", his pragmatic suggestion was that non-Muslims should seek to know more about Islam.

The bottomline, according to him, was: "Singapore being such a small place, one community's problems are also those of the other communities."

Guntor's statement also elicited a response from Singapore Muslim Affairs Minister Yaacob Ibrahim who was reported in the Straits Times as saying that Muslims in the republic had long practised a tolerant form of Islam.

Echoing Lim, he said this brand of Islam could not be allowed to stay quiet in these unsettling times.

The Straits Times quoted him as saying that moderate Islam must be reasserted to "counter external elements pushing for a more rigid interpretation of the religion".

Another side to Singapore was revealed in a story later in the week which saw journalist Lee Huay Leng providing a bird's eyeview of Singapore society after a three-year sojourn in Hong Kong.

"Impressed and disturbed" by what she saw in Singapore, she wondered aloud if Singaporeans were just too comfortable for their own good.

The week ended - with a toast to Singapore in conjunction with its National Day - and with Newater, the concoction that the republic is "selling" to its people in a bid to wean itself of dependence on Malaysia for the life-giving commodity.

There was much ado about water in the republic with the highlight of National Day celebrations being Singaporeans uncapping bottles of Newater to wet their whistle.

Their verdict of the water which comes from domestic and toilet run-off? A positive thumbs-up with some declaring it tasted "sweeter than tap water".

This rousing response to Newater was a far cry from what was reported recently in a poll of Singaporeans - a large minority said they would be sticking to mineral water or the like.

The gung-ho approach to Singapore's latest mass-market product comes on

the heels of the republic's decision not to renew one of the water deals with Malaysia which expires in 2011.

Singapore has indeed proven that one man's effluent can be another's drink.